

Nudity, humour and politics: Art Dubai 2015 delights and surprises

ART / 23 MAR 2015 / BY SUZANNE TROCME



A still from 'Cover Up', a 2014 film by Adel Abidin. *Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi and the artist*

▶ ↗ ■■■ 1 OF 9

Established as the leading art fair in the MENASA region - Middle East, North Africa, South Asia - Art Dubai pulled out all the stops in its ninth year and the numbers spoke volumes.

Under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and ruler of Dubai, Art Dubai secured 92 galleries across 40 countries, becoming a veritable smorgasbord for art lovers and buyers alike. Other international art fairs pale in comparison to the sheer variety that was on offer, not to mention the programs integral to supporting a region that has had to create the community for Art Dubai to flourish. The art school Campus Art Dubai runs throughout the year and the Global Art Forum, which this year debated technologies and their impact on the world of art and culture, beginning in Kuwait just prior to the fair, provided a lauded academic counterpoint to the fair itself. All projects around the fair intelligently combined local and foreign artists in a feasible program that didn't feel like an afterthought. The VIP program spanned the Gulf, from major international museum shows to exclusive preview and curator-led tours of collectors' homes, artists' studios and curator-led tours. Art Dubai, frankly, is a powerhouse.

Apart from the Global Art Forum, the non-profit program also includes The Abraaj Group Art Prize, the only prize in the MENASA region awarding artists on the basis of submitted proposals to a curated exhibition called Marker. This year, Marker explored intersections between Latin America and the Arab world. The prize

was won by female artist Yto Barrada.

The main reason, however, for the influx of attendees to Art Week prevalent throughout the region, was the belly of the fair itself, adroitly developed over the years by Fair Director Antonia Carver and housed at Madinat Jumeirah (there were four thousand revellers on the rather heady opening night, according to ex-pat Brit Ben Floyd, CEO and founder of Art Dubai - but we could still see the art).

If censorship exists, which according to Floyd it does, then it is not too evident. There was a nude, there was humour, and there were certainly politics represented throughout the entirely international slew of galleries. One very encouraging aspect was the price point at Art Dubai. Of course there were the heavy hitters with price tags to match, but there were affordable pieces for the fledgling collector too, not always from the most obvious quarters.

One message was repeatedly clear on the ground - the juggernaut of support for the burgeoning art and design communities in the region (and the UAE in particular) is borne from a local desire to create a shift in interests, particularly among the youth. If Art Dubai can play a part in that shift, then the show is doing its job. Wasn't art always meant to be a little provocative - and often part of a movement?